Telling a Good Story

Let me start this storytelling article with my own story about a student in one of my previous public-speaking classes. He was normally monotonous when talking in front of the class; nerves would take hold of him and render him impassive every time he spoke, so when it was his turn to once again present, it is likely that no one anticipated that this time would be any different. His presentation started out much the same as his others, but when he relayed a story about kids at his old middle school who had started their own fight club a la the hit 1999 movie, the mood in the room changed. He retold the ridiculous antics of these six-graders, who would fight in the bathroom for fun before lunch, and how they were inevitably caught by school staff after telling other people about their exploits: "They broke the first rule of Fight Club, you know, by talking about it, so there was no way they were going to get away with it." The audience began to laugh—not in raucous hysterics, but nonetheless the mood lightened. His classmates leaned in to hear more, the presenter smiled, and—as he told me later—his confidence started to grow.

The above anecdote illustrates one of the many ways that storytelling serves as a powerful presentation tool. Not only does it liven up the room, but it also makes concepts easier and more palatable for your audience. Audiences are used to making sense of information and events through the structure of storytelling. Stories bring a realism and emotional connection that abstract facts and figures lack. They make your audience see, understand, feel, and remember your message more distinctly than lists of information do.

For the Introductory Presentation, stories will be at the heart of your proof. They will be the evidence you use to illustrate the two traits that you claim will make you a good teammate. To ensure that the stories you tell are impactful for your audience and for your message, let's look at the hallmarks of good stories.

Good Stories Are Relevant

Stories should not be included just for the sake of adding a little color. They are pieces of evidence, just like statistics, research findings, and other means of logical support. Thus, they must illustrate the claim you are trying to prove. Use AIMC as your guide: stories are part of the message (the M), so you need to ask yourself as you decide on the tales to tell, "Will this story appeal to my audience (the A) *and* help me meet my presentation intent (the I)?" If the answer is "no" to either question, then find another story to share.

For the Introductory Presentation specifically, it is important that your stories *prove* that you have the traits you claim to have. Let me give you an example: I had a student who used *motivated to succeed in CMS 101* as one of his chosen traits for the Introductory Presentation. His story to support that claim recounted the ways in which he had focused too much on partying and not enough on studying in his first year at college. His argument was that now that he was on academic probation, he had a strong motivation to succeed to avoid failing out of school. While his story explained the reasons for his motivation, it failed to prove that he was actually motivated. His audience of potential future teammates had no evidence from that story that he would be able to succeed in the course or that he knew how to correct his past failings; the only trait he had proven in his narrative was a *lack* of motivation. Your story needs to prove your trait by illustrating a time when you have previously demonstrated it. He needed to

recount the ways in which he had improved his academic habits to demonstrate that he was indeed motivated to succeed and that knew how to act on that motivation. As you decide on your own stories, make sure that the narratives you choose are not just relevant, but that they serve as adequate evidence to prove that you have the traits you claim to possess.

Good Stories Make the Point Clear

Though you may have followed the credo of AIMC and ensured that your chosen stories are relevant to your audience and intent, this does not mean that the narratives' connections to the larger presentation will always be plainly evident to your audience. As Jerry Weissman (2009) points out multiple times in his presentations book *Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story*, good presenters don't leave the interpretation of their message up to their audience. As Weissman more bluntly puts it: "don't make the audience think." In other words, don't make listeners guess as to what the main point of your story is (they do enough of that in literature and poetry classes). Instead, tell them outright: "As you can probably tell from this story, I take organization *very* seriously, and that's a skill that can help keep our future presentations on track."

Good Stories Are Specific Narratives

As is explained in the reading on organization, the evidence you give to support your claims (the third step of each main point) needs to be specific. If, for instance, Shawnee gave a story intending to illustrate that she is calm under pressure, the following would be insufficient: "I work in retail, so, yeah, I know how to keep my cool with tough customers. There are always angry people wanting refunds or complaining about our clothes. Once a lady wanted to return jeans that she had spilled bleach all over as though that was somehow our fault. But I always keep my cool." There is no real story here—just explanation. The audience can't tell from this anecdote just what Shawnee did or does to keep her cool (or what "keeping her cool" means to her).

Now, the bleached-jeans story could have worked as evidence, but that story needed to be told more specifically and more fully:

> Let me give you an example of a time I had to keep my cool with a tough customer. I work at Express—the clothing store—in the mall, and sometimes people try to get away with some crazy returns. One time this woman came in—let's call her Regina, because if ever there was a "Mean Girl," she was it. So, Regina came in insisting that I refund her money for a pair of jeans she had spilled bleach all over. Now these weren't acid-wash jeans. These were dark-wash trouser jeans, now with a *huge* bleach stain going down the left knee. They looked ridiculous. They were totally ruined, and she was most definitely the one who ruined them. So, I explained to her that our policy is only to take back *un*damaged and *un*worn clothes, and *clearly* these jeans had been both damaged and worn.
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> Well, yeah, Regina wasn't having it. She got about a foot from my face—and that's not easy to do because there was a counter between us, so she was really leaning hard to get that close—and she started screaming in my face, "You're an idiot! Don't you know the customer's always right? There's obviously something wrong with these jeans

if they bleach that easily!" Now, in my head, I was thinking, "Lady, if you honestly think any store is selling bleach-proof jeans, I'm pretty sure *you're* the idiot."

But, of course, like the *stellar* retail worker I am, I was the picture of calm. I said, "Ma'am, I am so sorry these jeans got ruined. I wish I could give you a full refund for them, but that's against store policy and I would get in trouble for that. But, tell you what, here's what I can do: I have a 40% off coupon I can give you that you can apply to a new pair of jeans. It's good for another week, so you can buy a replacement pair today if you want, or you can take it home and think about it."

I'm not going to lie and say that she was thrilled, but she definitely calmed down a bit, took the coupon, and left the store without any further issues. So, my ability to stay calm helped defuse a nasty situation. Now, I really hope we don't have issues like that in our group in this class, but this shows how just good under pressure I am. We can all get on edge when it's close to deadline time or when someone doesn't participate as much, but I will be the one to keep everyone calm and talk us through the trouble.

You'll notice the above example is specific: it gives context for the story, specific details, dialogue, and descriptions of people and behaviors. All these elements make this anecdote feel like a real narrative, like a story among friends. Thus, it not only clearly illustrates how Shawnee was able to stay calm in an intense situation, but it is also a tale that would likely keep her audience's attention.

Good Stories Have Energy

If you read like I do so that you can hear characters' voices in your head (good voices, not demonic ones), then you probably read Shawnee's story as though she were telling it with great enthusiasm, which is, of course, how it was intended. Stories are illustrated not only through the words being used, but through the mannerisms of the teller. Shawnee would not just recall what Regina said in a flatlined voice; she would say it in a mock scream similar to how Regina really yelled it. Shawnee would not just say that Regina leaned over the counter to get a foot from her face, she would physically lean forward to emulate Regina and then show with her hand the distance between them. In other words, good storytellers reenact their stories when telling them. They imitate the energy and the drama of the real situation to let the audience *see* and *feel* it, not just hear it.

I would be remiss if I didn't remind you here that this need for genuine energy in your stories is yet another reason why you should not script out what you want to say. In your planning process, think of which story you want to tell for each main point, and practice making the point of that story clear, but do *not* write the story out. A tale that you are regurgitating word-for-word from memory will sound stiff and formulaic, and it will lack all the pizzazz and interaction of a conversational retelling.

Good Stories Invite the Audience In

Since good presentations feel like conversations, the stories within the presentation should also have conversational elements. Not only should the tone and language be comfortable, like with Shawnee's story above, but you can also work audience interaction into the story. For instance, in Shawnee's tale, she could have started by saying something like, "I work at Express at the mall. Do any of you work retail? [*Respond to responses*.] At the mall? [*Respond to responses*.] With the craziest customers known to humankind? [*Respond to responses*.] OK. Yeah, so you feel my pain!"

Shawnee could have also included other interaction by inviting feedback throughout the story, like, "I mean, come on, that's crazy, right?" Moreover, she could have responded to her audience's facial expressions and interjections as she spoke. For instance, if she saw people looking surprised when she talked about Regina leaning over the counter, she could have said, "I'm looking at some of your surprised faces, and it's nice to know I'm not the only one who thought she was absolutely bonkers." Keying into your audience enough to respond to their verbal and nonverbal feedback may seem difficult, but it makes a huge difference for your audience's engagement. Bear in mind that narratives are some of the most engaging tools in a presenter's toolbox. Keep that conversational feel alive by paying attention to and responding to your audience throughout your storytelling.

Using Humor in Your Stories

Oftentimes the best stories—the ones our audience members will remember the longest—are the ones that appeal to emotion. If your story isn't intended to be sad or shocking, then consider whether a bit of humor will fit.

You may believe that you just aren't a funny person, but you don't have to be a stand-up comedian to tell a funny story; in fact, you really shouldn't try to be. Funny presenters don't generally tell canned jokes, mainly because jokes are too high stakes. If the joke falls flat, you're left with some painfully awkward silence. Instead, funny presenters work humor into the stories they were already going to tell, so that even if the humor doesn't land, the story is still relevant and the presenter can move right along. In other words, don't worry about punch lines; instead use humor more subtly:

- Tell stories with funny twists or descriptions (e.g., "When you're working in a team, you may get that one teammate who thinks he knows it all. Let's call him Super-Genius Sam").
- Make small comments that will make the audience smile (e.g., "So, Super-Genius Sam is treating me like I'm about, oh, five years old. But just to be clear, I have a 4.0 GPA. I'm pretty smart, right? I know. [*smile*] My mom is so proud.").
- Include dialogue that allows the audience to picture themselves there (e.g., "So even though in my head I'm screaming, [*in a frustrated voice*] 'SHUT. UP. SAM!', in reality, I am the picture of calmness: [*in very calm voice*] 'Um, excuse me, Sam, but perhaps we should hear everyone's ideas first *before* we decide on a topic.'").
- Act it out (e.g., "So, Sam turns to me, clearly not happy that we're not all jumping on the Sam bandwagon without question, with one of these looks [*points to own face while making a clearly annoyed face*]. His eye has a little twitch going on [*points to own eye, modeling the twitching*], because he's clearly just trying to hold it together.").

An important note: Humor can be powerful, but it can also be dangerous. You can have a good-natured chuckle at other people's *behaviors*, but no bit of humor you use should feel like a personal or unwarranted attack on anyone. By all means, have a laugh at Super-Genius Sam's smugness, but leave his weight, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. out of it. Every audience member will have different sensibilities and making fun of someone for traits they cannot control will turn laughs to scowls all too quickly.

Tell Good Stories

As you plan your Introductory Presentation (and every presentation after), think carefully about which stories you will tell. Share narratives that are relevant to your audience and intent and that have clear connections to your larger points. Make sure that you are detailed and energetic in your retelling, and that you work on involving your audience when possible. Learning how to tell a good story will do wonders for your confidence as a presenter, as was evidenced by the initial story of this article. Looking at an audience of smiling, interested faces is one of the best medicines for presentation nerves. Telling good stories will help you create that happy, invested audience you need.

References

Weissman, J. (2009). *Presenting to win: The art of telling your story (updated and expanded edition)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press.